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From the sixth to the eighth century A.D., Japan was the recipient of massive cultural infusions from China. This acceptance of the Chinese pattern included, and to a great extent was based on, the acceptance of the Chinese language. The Chinese writing system was applied to Japanese because there was no other model to follow and in spite of the fact that the languages are quite dissimilar. While most of the basic characters used in writing Japanese are of Chinese origin, there are also a small number of "Japanese characters" called "kokuji." These forms are conscious creations of the Japanese mind in the form of Chinese characters and in accordance with principles for writing Chinese characters. On the average, these constructed characters are of rather recent origin and tend to be complicated to write. Most of the "kokuji" are constructed of elements which suggest the meaning rather than indicating the pronunciation. For example, to denote "killer whale" the two Chinese characters for "fish" and "tiger" were combined into one. It would seem that most Japanese characters were devised to represent highly specific units of measure or objects such as types of trees, fish, articles of clothing or equipment. Only three of these characters are included in the Japanese Government's list of 1,850 basic characters but they are still used informally. (JD)

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JAPANESE CHARACTERS IN WRITTEN JAPANESE

So far as is known, the Japanese never made any attempt to develop a writing system of their own. Like most other ancient societies they borrowed a script to write their language.[1]

Japan's first exposure to any writing system probably occurred in the late third century A.D. and that system was Chinese. From the sixth to the eighth century Japan was the recipient of massive cultural infusions from China. Chinese political and ethical ideas, governmental forms, music, art, religion and even money were adopted and adapted. This acceptance of the Chinese pattern included, and to a large extent was based on the acceptance of the Chinese language. The Chinese script was later applied to the writing of Japanese. Professor Reischauer has offered the opinion that

> "It was a major historical tragedy for both the Japanese and the Koreans that, because they were so far removed from the other centers of early writing, they did not learn about phonetic systems of transcription until after the use of Chinese characters had been firmly established."[2]

The tragedy of it all stems from the fact that "Chinese is about as different from Japanese as any language can be, both in phonological system, grammatical categories, and syntactic structures."[3] Chinese is generally monosyllabic and uninflected; Japanese is generally polysyllabic and highly inflected as to verbs and adjectives. In Japanese, a large number of suffixes, or inflections, can be added to verb or adjective stems and these inflections can in turn be inflected. Of course, Chinese is a tonal language and Japanese is not; but this has nothing to do with writing systems.

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Japanese use of the Chinese writing system was two-fold. First, the Japanese recognized Chinese as the medium of cultural transmission and had to master that language. By the middle of the seventh century knowledge of Chinese was a prerequisite to entry into the court service in Japan.[4] Secondly, the Japanese sought to adapt the Chinese system to the writing of Japanese for there was simply no other model to use. The process of establishing Chinese characters as the medium for written Japanese extended from about the fourth to the ninth century and its effects are still evident today. Highly cumbersome and unsuited to Japanese, the Chinese writing system as modified to write Japanese has been an impediment to learning for centuries. The late Professor Yamagiwa once commented that the requirement for freshman composition courses in American colleges is a reflection of the inability of the American school system to teach the fundamentals of English in twelve years of schooling, and added

> "In Japan the problem is even more complex because of the heavy legacy of a system of charactery, borrowed from China, coupled with the use of a kana syllabary which must be learned in two styles. It is estimated that some three years of a student's life are taken up in the study of writing system itself."[5]

The basic unit of writing with which the Japanese had to deal is usually called a "character", a "symbol", or an "ideograph". Some believe a more apt term is "logograph", that is, a symbol which represents a word, as contrasted to symbols such as the letters of an alphabet or syllabary which represent sounds or combinations of sounds.[6]

Professor Miller holds that the Chinese writing system can be described as one based on morphemic rather than phonemic or phonetic principles. In explanation, he states that the unit for the Chinese script provided individual graphic signs--morphemes--units of the language such as <u>shan</u>,

"mountain", rather than /sh/a/n/.[7] With regard to the use of Chinese characters in the Japanese writing system, Professor Crowley considers them to be morphographs, that is, they are "elicitors of auditory responses, or phoneme sequences", and thus they "function as graphic representations of the morphemes of the language."[8]

In general, there were three ways in which the Japanese used Chinese characters: (1) semantically, in their original meanings in Chinese, but pronounced in Japanized renderings of the Chinese pronounciations, (2) symbolically, as symbols to stand for Japanese words pronounced in Japanese, and (3) phonetically, as symbols of sounds, and independent of meaning, to write Japanese.[9] The phonetic usage developed at least three different and completely phonetic means of writing Japanese using various forms of the Chinese characters.

The number of Chinese characters available for adoption was considerable. When Li Ssu systematized the writing of Chinese in the third century B.C., he compiled a list of about 3,300 characters. By the eighteenth century, the number of characters found in the K'ang-hsi Dictionary was 48,902. A popular dictionary used in Japan before World War II contained nearly 14,000 characters, but this does not really indicate the number of characters in frequent usage. A prewar newspaper might have stocked about 8,000 characters, but most educated Japanese would probably recognize little more than half that number. The trend has been to reduction of the number of characters used in Japanese and in 1946, the Government of Japan issued a list of 1,850 so-called tooyoo kanji, or characters for use for the time being.

One of the casualties of this reduction in the number of characters recommended for usage was the kokuji, or Japanese character, that conscious

creation of the Japanese mind in the form of the Chinese character and in accordance with principles for the writing of Chinese characters. The Japanese character is a rather recent creation. Professor Tsukishima believes there was no need to create such characters until rather recently because the initial massive adoption of Chinese characters was followed by centuries of borrowing in lesser numbers. The approximate time that specific later borrowings entered the Japanese language is duly noted in Japanese dictionaries. Professor Tsukishima also believes that the Japanese invented characters mainly for the purpose of representing ideas (gainen) which did not exist in China, but which were present in Japan.[10]

As one means to gauge the extent of conscious creation of Japanese characters and to draw whatever conclusions might be permitted, an analysis was made of the 5,446 characters found in a recent character dictionary. (A. N. Nelson, The Modern Reader's Japanese-English Character Dictionary, Chas. E. Tuttle, Tokyo, 1963.)

The number of conscious creations, or kokuji, identified in the dictionary was 77, or a little over one per cent of the total. Although a few of these Japanese characters are relatively simple to write, that is, a small number of strokes is required to construct them, most are rather complicated. The average stroke number is 13.3, about one more on the average than has been determined to be the average number of some 7,200 Chinese characters which have been analyzed. When compared to the stroke analysis of 726 simplified Chinese characters, the Japanese characters are nearly twice as complex. The simplification of the Chinese characters reduced the average stroke number from 14.1 to 7.3.[11]

The Japanese characters may also be analyzed with regard to the method of construction, or formation. Traditionally, Chinese characters have been

classified in six categories. For example, the first category is called syangsying in Chinese, or shookei in Japanese and refers to characters which are imitative or pictorial in nature. Samples of this classification are the characters for sun, moon and water, all of which are actually sketches representing the objects depicted. The most important category is called syingsheng in Chinese and keisei in Japanese. These are "form-sound" characters, those in which one element of the character indicates the general class of meaning and another element the pronounciation. The Chinese character for "crow", pronounced ya consists of one element representing "bird" and another pronounced "ya" - one part for meaning, one part for pronounciation. Approximately 90% of all Chinese characters fall into this classification.

Perhaps surprisingly, most of the kokuji, or Japanese characters do not fit this category, but belong to the group termed hweiyi in Chinese and kai-i in Japanese. These characters are called "suggestive", or "logical" and consist of elements, none of which indicate the pronounciation, but only "suggest" the meaning. For instance the modern word jung or shuu, meaning "many" or a "crowd" was originally a depiction of three men. (After all, "three's a crowd"). Similarly, the Japanese word for "noisy" - yakamashii - may be written with "three women".

Several of the Japanese characters do not show much ingenuity in the construction of "logical" characters. About 15 of them denote words for measures of weight, capacity, or distance. For instance, the Chinese character for rice, pronounced "mei" was used phonetically to represent "meetoru". To show the word kilometer - kirumeetoru - the Japanese simply combined the character for mei with sen, the character for 1,000.

Similarly, the characters for ten and 100 were added to "suggest" decameter and hectometer.

Other characters, however, showed considerable inventiveness. The word jinrikisha may be written with three characters used as a compound word: jin -"man" plus riki -"power" plus sha - "vehicle," or "cart". The Japanese invented, to replace these three characters, one simple character consisting of the character for cart and the character for man standing to the left of the cart. To denote "mountain pass", the Japanese combined into one character three Chinese characters, those of "up", "down", and "mountain". To denote the "killer whale", or shachi, the two characters combined into one were those for "fish" and "tiger". One of the most "graphic" examples is the character for tsukaeru ("to block", "to obstruct") which was made by taking the character for "gate", which itself is a nearly unmistakable depiction of the swinging doors of an old-time saloon, and placing within this gate the character for "mountain".

Two of the Japanese characters have religious significance which is seen clearly from their construction. Shikimi is the name of a tree whose branches are placed on Buddhist graves so the character is a combination of the characters for "tree" and "Buddha". Similarly, sakaki is the name of a sacred Shinto tree and consists of the characters for "tree" and "god", in the Japanese sense of kami.

All in all, the analysis of the Japanese characters does not suggest they were invented to denote "ideas" which existed in Japan, but not in China. Rather, it seems, most of them were devised to represent highly specific units of measure or objects such as certain types of trees, fish, articles of clothing or equipment.

Certain anomalies appear in the pronounciation of the Japanes characters. In general, Chinese characters used by the Japanese have

two types of pronounciations: the Japanized version of the Chinese pronounciation at the time the word entered the Japanese language, and the purely Japanese pronounciation. Therefore, one would expect that all Japanese inventions would have only a Japanese pronounciation. Surprisingly, this is not the case. The Japanese character used for hataraku - "to work" also has a Japanized pronounciation of a non-existent Chinese word for this specific character. It is a logical impossibility since the character never existed in Chinese.

Even more unusual is the pronounciation assigned to the Japanese inventions for "command" and for "rivet", respectively joo and byoo, both of which are Chinese readings. These two characters have no Japanese reading. The reason for this anomaly escapes me.

In certain instances character invention was redundant. For instance two characters were invented to represent mushiru, "to pluck out". The Chinese characters for "mouth" and "food" were combined to stand for "to eat" (kuu, kurau) when a perfectly useful Chinese character was available. Perhaps the least useful of all was the invention of a character to signify maro, the personal pronoun "I". Not only does it take 18 strokes to write the character, but any Japanese can immediately list at least a dozen Japanese words for "I", and with a little thought for special situations, could probably produce an additional half a dozen.

As of today, only three of the Japanese inventions have survived to be contained in the list of 1,850 characters approved for use by the Government of Japan. Two of these, hataraku, "to work", and hatake, "a field", are required to be learned in elementary school. Third character is tooge, "mountain pass", formed by combining the Chinese characters for "up", "down", and "mountain".

It would seem that the era of formal recognition of conscious creation of Japanese characters is over, but this will not halt the informal sport of inventing characters. If you should be a guest at a sake party in Japan and someone asks you what is the meaning of a character written by combining the Chinese characters for "up", "down" and "girl", be ready with the answer--it's "elevator girl".

END NOTES

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